



## To a nation's heroes ...

Susan Morris is donor recruitment director for United Blood Services in Meridian. The staff there dedicated their efforts in February to military personnel, with the theme "I Gave Blood ... For the Love of our Troops."

Events included a month-long, patriotic blood drive, a Valentine's Day card that donors signed for wounded troops at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and a letter-writing campaign for those still serving overseas.

Here is Susan's belated Valentine's letter, written on behalf of all the folks at United Blood Services.



Morris

This Valentine message brings to you the love and gratitude of the people of Meridian, Miss. Though we are separated by time and distance, we want you to know we are with you every day in our thoughts and in our prayers.

With heavy hearts we've watched as young soldiers from here at home, and across our nation, were deployed to places far away from those who love them.

With unwavering courage and the commitment to serving our country, you've shown us what dignity, honor and strength of character truly mean. You've inspired us to be better ... to be more and to do more, and to find ways to serve our communities with honor.

In this season of love, we at United Blood Services wish to speak with one voice to tell you how proud we are of you, how grateful we are for your service and sacrifice. You give us hope for a better world. Thank you.

Wherever your life takes you, go forward with confidence, and know that you have the love and admiration of every citizen in Meridian and across the state of Mississippi ...

Best wishes to you and to your family. May God be with you and guide you each day. We hold you close to our hearts.

Susan Morris

# Navy base adds anti-WMD training

Until recently, Petty Officer 3rd Class Brett Cote was a staff writer for Skyline, a bi-weekly newspaper published by Naval Air Station Meridian. A U.S. Navy journalist, Brett has been transferred to the Defense Information School in Maryland to take a video production course. His ultimate assignment, one he volunteered for, will be as a combat photographer attached to forward units overseas.

Brett's story is about the base's continuing commitment to training law enforcement officers to deal with clandestine methamphetamine labs and a new health worry that is suddenly on all of our minds — the threat of weapons of mass destruction.

By Brett Cote  
special to The Star

A tenant command onboard Naval Air Station Meridian is blazing new paths in anti-terrorism training by teaching police officers how to recognize and respond to biological weapons labs.

Established in 1992, the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy, or RCTA, trains police officers from five different states. RCTA teaches everything from basic narcotics investigations to high-risk entry techniques.

In the spring of 2004, the academy added a Clandestine Lab and Weapons of Mass Destruction Certification class to its curriculum. The acronym for the class is "CLAW."

"We're focusing it towards clandestine labs," said Mick Mollica, CLAW instructor.

"We've always done a methamphetamine labs class, so what we did was add a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) aspect to that course."

### Recognizing the threat

Orrin Fuelling, RCTA director of training, said the CLAW class requires a 50-hour commitment from students.

When a lab is uncovered and arrests have been made, whether the lab was manufacturing drugs or WMD, Fuelling explained, local police departments have to cordon off the lab area and call for specialists from agencies like the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics. The specialists assess and dismantle the lab.

With trained officers in the departments, Fuelling said, local authorities will be able to act faster to secure a situation.

"When you've got somebody in that area who is qualified, he or she can go in there and make those assessments as to what exactly is in there, how dangerous it is and how many people are going to have to come in to clean it up and take it down safely," Fuelling said.

"This makes the officers more valuable because they'll be able to recognize a WMD lab. They'll be able to get close enough to make an assessment, know how to seal it off and know who to call."

### When children are exposed

The RCTA also added the Drug Endangered Children, or DEC, training program to the CLAW curriculum. With the DEC training, officers learn how to determine whether children in the area of a clandestine lab have been exposed to harmful chemicals.

"It's not unheard of to find 3-year-olds testing positive for meth for being in and around a house that's being used as a meth lab," Mollica said.

"This course is the first in the United States to combine the Drug Endangered Children training with the WMD and the clandestine labs."

Col. Robert Pierce, RCTA commandant, said he and his staff are proud to be the first in the nation to offer this training. RCTA received a grant for just under a million dollars for hazardous material and anti-terrorism training.

Pierce said since anti-terrorism and homeland security grants are a fairly new thing, there is no real precedent or instructions on how best to spend the money.

"I don't think that anywhere in the nation there's anybody telling people what to do with all these grants that they're getting for this type of stuff since 9/11 happened," Pierce said.

"So we got with our instructors, stepped forward and produced a couple of courses. We're the first in the nation to offer this, and this is something we're very proud of."

"There are a lot of grants out there, and just about every police department has probably got a grant it can buy equipment with — but it's not doing much good if they can't get the training and certification. And that's what we're trying to do."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

### HAZARD SUIT

A law enforcement officer taking the Clandestine Lab and Weapons of Mass Destruction certification class at Naval Air Station Meridian helps a classmate adjust the airtight seal on his face mask.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

### METH LAB

During mock meth lab raids at the Regional Counterdrug Training Academy, students learn to make assessments about what is at the site, how dangerous it is and how many people are needed to dismantle it.

## 'We will pull through this tough time'

Tracie Thornton is a radiologic technologist at Riley Hospital in Meridian. Here's how she answered the question, "If you could talk right now to a military person serving overseas, what would you tell him or her?"

By Tracie Thornton  
special to The Star

I am so proud of my husband, Capt. Dexter Thornton, and all of the men and women serving overseas.

Dexter will be in Iraq serving with the Mississippi Army National Guard's 150th Combat Engineer Battalion during 2005. Every day my children and I pray for their daddy's safe return home to us.

I support our president and pray for all of the decisions he has to make. We will live in a better America because of them. Life here is hard without our loved ones and my heart goes out to all of the soldiers and their families.

It breaks my heart knowing that the soldiers with children are missing out on a year of their lives. We will always be thinking of you on holidays, birthdays, first days of school and the many other important days in our children's lives.

God never gives us more than we can handle. With the support of our family, friends and community, we will pull through this tough time. Thank you for protecting us. Get the job done and come home soon.

Remember that we are praying for you all: Lord hold our troops in your loving hands. Protect them as they protect us. Bless them and their families for the selfless acts they perform and the sacrifices they make. Amen.



Thornton